

Front Desk Operations Management and Guests Loyalty of 4-Star Hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

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This study set out to establish the relationship between front desk operations management and guest loyalty of 4-star hotels in Port Harcourt. The predictor was dimensioned with service quality assurance and responsiveness of personnel; while guest loyalty was measured by repeat visit and referrals; giving rise to four hypotheses. The purpose was to ascertain if there is any relationship between the dimension of front desk operations management and the measures of guest loyalty. A sample of 150 hotel guests was drawn for the study; while the analysis was based on 126 of these guests. The univariate analyses showed acceptable level for each of the variables; while the correlations were performed with Pearson's product moment correlation technique at a significance level of 0.05. The result showed strong positive correlations between the dimensions of the independent variable and the measures of guest loyalty. Based on this, it was concluded that front desk operations management is a strong predictor of guest loyalty; as hotel operations managers can use it to achieve their desired levels of improved outcomes especially interns of repeat visit and referrals. Based on these, it was recommended that to achieve desired levels of guest repeat visits and referrals, hotel management especially the front office department should regularly train their staff so they can be continuously updated with latest front desk management practices. This will equip them with the requisite knowledge on how to handle customers' requests and complaints so as to assure them of service quality. Front office personnel should be taught and encouraged to be responsive in their dealings with quests/customers. This would require a great deal of timeliness in handling guest requests and complaints; as well reporting to the appropriate authorities in matters they cannot handle.

Keywords:

Discontinuance
Theory, Repeat Visits,
Responsiveness of
Personnel, Guest
Referrals, Service
Quality Assurance.

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Background to the Study

The hotel industry has been recognized as a global industry, with producers and consumers spread around the world. The use of hotel facilities such as rooms, restaurants, bars, Nightclubs etc. are no longer considered a luxury. For many people these services have become integral components of lifestyle (Kandampully, 2000) Moreover, in the last two decades, demand for and supply of hospitality services beyond that of the traditional services intended for travelers have escalated the growth of the hospitality industry globally, leading to intense competition in the market place. One of the greatest challenges facing hotels today is the ever growing volume and pace of competition. To combat this problem, operations managers of hotels try to increase their share of the market by giving price discounts as a means of attracting customers. Incidentally, they run the risk of having their long and medium terms profitability impacted upon negatively. However, experience has shown that rather than the price, it is quality of service mostly from the contact personnel that becomes the key to hotels' ability to differentiating themselves from competitors and gaining loyalty. Hence, it has become important for hotels to develop customer loyalty as a means of gaining competitive edge as opposed to relying solely on pricing strategies. Research has shown that a 10 percent increase in customer loyalty can produce a profit increase of 35 percent (Rechheld and Sesser, 1990). Operations managers in the hospitality industry know that for them to improve on profit there is need to satisfy customers so that their loyalty can be guaranteed. Therefore, the future and survival of hotels is predicated upon a devoted emphasis on customer loyalty by the managers.

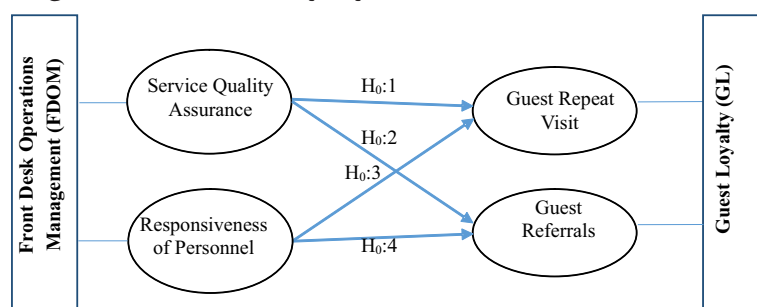
One of the important units of a hotel is the front desk (front office), which is critical to the organization's success. It is the first customer-facing unit that a guest encounters; as well as the first port of call for most guests with queries or problems. The front office of any organization is said to be the image makers; as such, plays a very important role in guest/customer satisfaction and loyalty. Emphasizing on the antecedents of guest loyalty, Kurtz (1998) used his study on customer perception of service quality and brand loyalty in Scotland to posit that customers will be attached to a particular brand when the services they demand for is delivered on time, and their complaints are handled promptly. This calls for effective management of front desk operations so as to acquaint the front desk officers with the necessary skills and traits for professional dealings with guests. Some of the attributes that catches the fancy of customers in the front desk is the physical appeal or appearance (tangibility) of these service agents followed by their intelligence of the service on offer (assurance), their friendliness (empathy), timeliness (responsiveness) and their ability to keep their calm even while under intense pressure (Dix, 1990). In addition to this, there is need for the hotels to be of standard and strive to ensure customer loyalty by meeting or exceeding customer expectations in service delivery; especially by front desk officers.

These notwithstanding, getting customer loyalty has become an up-hill task for operations managers of hospitality establishments as it is quite crucial for their organizations' survival. The variety of options available to customers has made it even more difficult to getting customers committed to a particular brand. Moreover, customers most times do not exercise patience or give a second chance if their expectation of a service from a particular service

provider is not met. Hence the need for operations managers to look for appropriate measures, schemes, programs and offerings that are tailored towards customer satisfaction which will in-turn give them a good shot at getting customer loyalty. The consequence of rendering poor services or not meeting customer expectation is that no customer will want to bring business to such to such an establishment and this will reduce the chances of customers being loyal to such brand. It is true that some of the forces influencing and shaping these expectations are largely uncontrollable; yet, it is expected that managers of front desk operations should have control over these factors. Another identified problem is the use of ill-equipped personnel in front desk operations or outright use of staff that are not updated on recent service delivery trends in this sensitive position. As such, most of these employees lack the ability to remain calm when under pressure since all customers can never be alike temperamentally. This scenario tends to adversely impact on guest patronage cum loyalty.

The foregoing tends to suggest a link between front desk operations management (FDOM) and guest loyalty of hotels. Previous studies on the subject matter especially those cited above are quite commendable. However, their outcomes cannot be applicable to the environment of this study because of the disparity in prevailing factors; such as government policies and characteristics of the study elements. This has created a hiatus in knowledge; necessitating this study which is aimed at ascertaining the relationship between FDOM and customer loyalty of hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Specifically, FDOM was dimensioned by 'service quality assurance' and 'responsiveness of personnel' as adapted from Baker and Riley (1994); while customer loyalty was measured with 'guest repeat visits' and 'guest referrals' as adapted from Cohen et al (1983). It is expected that this study's outcome will be beneficial to hotel operations managers who will use it as a template for effective service design and management of front desk operations. By so doing, they might attain a reasonable level of guests' loyalty; and maintain competitive advantage over competitors. Customers and industry players will find it valuable in determining service expectations and crafting of needed regulations in the industry.

Figure 1: Diagrammatic Conceptualization of the Relationship between Front Desk Operations Management and Guest Loyalty.



Source: Researchers' conceptualization (2019) based on dimensions of front desk operations management derived from Baker and Riley (1994) and measures of Customer loyalty adapted from Cohen et al (1983).

Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning for this study is the disconfirmation theory; which is one of the primary foundations for satisfaction models. According to the theory, satisfaction is ascertained by the difference between perceived performance and cognitive standards like expectation and desires (Khalifa and Liu, 2003). Customer's expectation may be defined as the partial belief of a customer about a product (McKinney, Yoon and Zahedi, 2002). Expectations are regarded as predictions that consumers make concerning what may likely happen in the course of a transaction or exchange (Zeithmal and Berry, 1988). Perceived performance is seen as the customer's view of how his needs, desires and wants are fulfilled by the performance of the product (Cadotte et al., 1987). Perceived quality refers to the judgment about the overall excellence or superiority of an entity by the customer (Zeithmal, 1988). Disconfirmation therefore, is defined as the subjective judgments of a consumer as a result of his comparison of performance expectations to their perceptions of performance received (McKinney et al., 2002, Spreng et al., 1996). Disconfirmation theory states that satisfaction is essentially defined by the difference (gap) between a customer's expectations/desires and perceived performance; which is an encouraging approaches to the explanation of satisfaction. According to the theory, the strength and direction (positive or negative) of the gap (disconfirmation) between expectations and perceived performance is what determines satisfaction. The theory hypothesizes that three outcomes of this evaluation are possible and they are:

- i. Confirmation occurs when the actual performance matches the standard, leading to a neutral feeling.
- ii. Positive disconfirmation ensues when performance is higher than the standard, there by leading to satisfaction.
- iii. Negative disconfirmation happens when performance is lower than the standard, thereby leading to dissatisfaction.

The implication of this theory is that all hotel guests have service quality expectations; and after a service experience, the disconfirmation theory comes to play with any of the three options playing out. Confirmation and positive disconfirmation outcomes will most likely lead to guest loyalty; especially, in terms of revisit intentions, referrals and positive word of mouth. While a negative disconfirmation will most likely lead to loss of customer and negative word of mouth.

The Concept of Front Desk Operations Management

The front office is where guests make their first important impression, and furthermore, it is a communication hub for the hotel's operation (Baker and Riley, 1994). In their opinion, Vallen and Vallen (2009) described the front office as a bundle of duties and guest service. These definitions go a long way to outlining the importance of the front office and the role it plays in the delivery of customer service; and that management of this important office at all-times must make ensure that standards are kept. The front office managers and team need to be knowledgeable of both the standard and the standard operating procedures (SOPs) in place, in order for set standards to be achieved. In relation to Standards, it is the job of the front desk operations manager to ensure that customer" first experience with the hotel is a

positive one and this can be achieved through vigorous training of the front desk officers. It is equally the job of the front desk operations manager to ensure effective management of the service encounter. Hence, the job of the front office team is about exceeding expectations of guests, not just meeting them. Zeithaml et al (1993) describing the dimensions of service that customers expect to receive. Among the five dimensions of service quality, customers tend to relate more with reliability and responsiveness. This implies that managers need to show or put measures in place that will convince their guests to rely (Reliability) on the services provided to them and at the same time put mechanisms in place to tackle any kind of complain (Responsiveness) on time so as to satisfy the guest.

Service Quality Assurance

Assurance “is the knowledge and courtesy of employee and their ability to convey trust and confidence” (Parasuraman et al, 1985). It requires employees to be knowledgeable and courteous enough to conveying trust and confidence. Broadly, assurance covers ensuring that customers feel quite safe in all their transactions. It equally demands that employees be courteous enough to customers always and have the requisite knowledge to respond to their questions. Shanka (2012) in a study of service quality and bank customer satisfaction in Ethiopian banking sector revealed that customers patronize banks that are good in tangibility, reliability and assurance dimensions. Saghier and Nathan (2013) in their study of factors affecting the Egyptian banks found that customer satisfaction is significantly affected by reliability, empathy, assurance and responsiveness while tangibility does not have any significant effect on the satisfaction of customers. Thus the relationship between assurance and bank customers but what the two studies have in common is their findings that service quality assurance is a key component in satisfying customers. These findings positively reinforced the believe that if front office personnel of hospitality establishments can provide quality service assurance to its customers, it will go a long way to enhancing the chances of their hotel in gaining guest loyalty.

Responsiveness of Personnel

Responsiveness is the ability to consistently provide timely and right solutions in such a way and manner that is of value to the customer (Parasuraman et al., 1985). It is the readiness to deliver prompt service and help customers. It is equally the capacity to effectively respond to difficult and challenging situations. Responsiveness entails keeping customers informed on service availability, prompt delivery of service to customers, willingness to serve customers and respond to their request (Kotler and Keller, 2007). In an empirical study about customer satisfaction with service of a micro finance institution in Togo, (Kanyurhi 2013) found that responsiveness remains the important dimension in microfinance sector. On their part, Al-jahazzi and Sultan (2017) studied on the demographic differences in Jordanian banks service quality perception, and found that banks in Jordan grew in customer base when e-banking was introduced. The introduction of e-banking reduced the amount of time spent on long queues either to withdraw, deposit, transfer, pay for utility of even to make a complaint or enquiry. The level of response grew as the banks can now deliver services to their customers promptly and timely too.

The Concept of Guest Loyalty

Customer/guest loyalty is defined as a deeply held commitment to patronizing a preferred brand of product or service in the future in spite of the chances of switching behavior occasioned by situational stimuli and marketing efforts (Oliver, 1999). Customer loyalty (GL) is viewed as the relationship strength between an individual's relative attitude and re-patronage. GL is a crucial need for business success; as satisfaction alone cannot take any business to its desired level. Nevertheless, it has been proven that satisfaction and loyalty have a direct link; as satisfied customers are loyal while dissatisfied customers are vendors (Heskett 2011). Customer satisfaction produces a positive financial result, especially in regular purchases. It is attitudinal while guest/customer loyalty is behavioural. Gajjar (2013) differentiated between the factors that influence customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. However, in today's unforgiving and competitive market, the ability to create and maintain customer/guest loyalty is more intricate than what it was in the years gone by. This is because of technological breakthrough and widespread uses of the internet. Loyalty building requires the organization to focus on value creation through its products/services and to demonstrate its interest in fulfilling the desire of its customers and building lasting relationships with them (Griffin 2002). Customer/guest loyalty is never built overnight; it is usually established after series of transactions. Knowing that no organization can be of world class standard at everything, it is important that organizations maintain good relationship with their customers by working in broader contexts that extend beyond themselves (McDonlad and Keen 2000). Gremler and Brown (1997) categorized customer loyalty into three - behavior loyalty, intentional loyalty and emotional loyalty. According to them behaviour loyalty is the repeat purchasing behavior; intentional loyalty is the possible buying intention; while emotional loyalty is attained when a customer feels a sense of alignment between his values, ideas/passion and the offerings of a brand. For the purpose of this study, GL was measured with two measures – guest repeat visit and guest referral as adapted from Cohen et al (1983). These have been elaborated upon viz.

Guest Repeat Visit

Revisit intention is the plan and willingness of guests/visitors to repeat their visit within a year and their readiness to travel to the destination often (Baker and Crompton, 2000). Therefore, a crucial service outcome for service providers is having satisfied customers that intend to revisit their destination (Shonk, 2008). An important factor that influences revisit intentions of customers is total utility. In many customer satisfaction studies, repurchase intention is often included as a consequence of satisfaction (Boulding et al., 1993). Satisfying experience influence future purchase intention; hence, customer loyalty. Repeat patronage is the commonly employed intentional behavior measure. In addition to the willingness to recommend the holiday or its component to others, is the satisfaction derived from initial or previous encounter(s) (Hepworth and Mateus, 1994). However as an overt behavior, repeat visits/purchases can be influenced by economic, political and temporal factors. Guest ability to revisit is a function of satisfying a certain set of hospitality needs; functional or utilitarian, identity of emotional, contextual or situational (Fishwick and Vining, 1989). Hence, repeat patronage of a guest depends on the satisfaction he/she derives from the stay in a particular hotel.

Guest Referral

Referral is one thing companies stand to enjoy when customers are satisfied. Satisfied customers will always want friends and family to have a clue of an experience they had. This makes customer satisfaction a necessary condition for guest/customer referral. Hence, as the global service market place continues to be very competitive lodging businesses have been challenged to increase their levels of quality and service, improve their product design, and decrease their product development cycle times. Satisfaction in this instance comes when a customer experiences a service and compares his encounter to his service expectation (Oliver, 1980). Guest satisfaction is applicable to both tangible and intangible goods; and may be described at two separate levels - transactional or cumulative (Jones and Suh, 2000). Significant progress has been made in these areas, but one of the most crucial objects in the hotel marketplace today is providing total customer satisfaction (Skogland and Siguaw, 2004). Positive advocacy is considered to be one of the most crucial outcomes of all hospitality marketing activities in a market-oriented firm. The satisfied customer refers their family and friends. The link between sales, service, satisfaction and profit is direct. The more customers are satisfied, the more they spend and refer other people (Gerson, 1993). On the other hand, disappointed customers will go elsewhere with their business and more likely tell several others about their experience too. While it may take many positive encounters to get good recommendations; it usually takes only two negative encounters to make an enemy for life (Hill and Alexander, 2000).

Empirical Literature on Relationship between Front Desk Operations Management and Customer Loyalty

Service Quality Assurance and Guest Repeat Visit

Scholars have surveyed the link between service quality assurance and repeat visit. For instance, Bolton (1994) sought to ascertain the relationship between E-service delivery and repeat intention. He used a sample of 309 customers of Barclays bank in England and adopted the cross-sectional survey design. The study found that when customers were sure they could trust the E-services rendered by the workers, they tended to come back. On his part, Rust (1993) found empirical evidence to support the notion that satisfaction is the leading factor in determining customer loyalty. This evidence was presented in his study of service quality and customer satisfaction in selected South African supermarkets. The sample comprised 150 customers equally selected via the convenience sampling technique from 10 supermarkets in Pretoria, South Africa. The findings further indicated that revisit intention was as a result of customer satisfaction; of which service assurance is a determining factor. Other studies have linked customer satisfaction to repurchase intentions (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1980). However, a study by Anderson and Fornell (1994) on selected fast foods in Ohio, U.S pointed out that it is not quite understood how predictive repurchase intentions are of actual purchase behavior. These findings need to be investigated in the Port Harcourt environment; hence the hypothesis that:

H_{0,1} There is no significant relationship between service quality assurance and guest repeat visit of 4 star hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Service Quality Assurance and Guest Referrals

The relationship between service quality assurance and referrals has been of interest to many scholars. Specifically, Kaura, Prasad and Sharma (2015) investigated service quality and customer behavioral intention of selected service organizations in Kuwait. It involved 167 participants who reacted to the level of which service quality dimensions' influences customer behavior. The findings revealed that an assured service convincingly make customers to repeat their visit and go some extra mile to recommending the same service to friends and relatives. The study also showed that referral is a function of service expectation met and exceeded. This assertion is in line with the findings of Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt (2002); who investigated the link between service assurance and word of mouth of restaurants in Norwich city, England. They purposively sampled 542 respondents and found that in order to gain and influence positive behavior from clients, service providers must gain the trust and confidence of their clients; and one way of doing that, is by providing assured service. These studies apart from establishing the link between the two variables have shown that referral is a good index for measuring the quality of service enjoyed and experienced. Brady and Cronin (2001) supported this when they opined through their study that any business that is not enjoying referral should look inwards to see where they are getting it wrong. Contrariwise, Gronroos (2007) averred through his study that bad service attracts negative word of mouth and can run down any organization. The fact that these findings are alien to the environment of this study necessitates the proposition of a hypothesis on the relationship between the two variables. Hence, the hypothesis which states that:

H_{0:2} There is no significant relationship between service quality assurance and guest referrals of 4 star hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Responsiveness of Personnel and Guest Repeat Visit

Customers do not like it when their time is wasted (Fornell, 1992); hence, the need for responsiveness. Being responsive is responding to request, issues and orders in and on time. Al-borie and Damanhour (2013) conducted a study on service providers' capabilities. They adopted the cross-sectional survey design and used the convenience sampling technique to select a sample of 250 guests of selected hotels in Qatar. The study revealed that a responsive system and service providers' timeliness are good measures of increasing customers' revisit intention. This is in line with the study of Parasuraman et al (1988) who used their service quality dimensions' model to measure the influence of service quality based on the integrated view of consumer – company relationship. The study showcased that if service providers/companies provide quick and timely service. It has the capacity to induce positive consumer behavior. Similarly, the study by Wong and Sohal (2003) involving 1261 respondents examined service responsibilities in large chain department store in Victoria, Australia. The findings showed that one way to improve customer – client relationship is by responding to customer requests and complaints responsively. Hence the need to test the hypothesis that:

H_{0:3} There is no significant relationship between responsiveness of personnel and guest repeat visit of 4 star hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Responsiveness of Personnel and Guest Referral

Studies by different scholars have demonstrated the importance of service quality on customer expectation (Fitri, 2012; Malik et al, 2011, Mousavi and Nosratabadi, 2015). Service quality variables are stimulators of positive guest behavior when applied rightly. An online survey of 138 customers of restaurants which focused on service delivery and its effect on customer satisfaction by Constantine and Iymperopoulou (2009), found that responsiveness out of every other service delivery quality was regarded as very important by customers in their choice of restaurant. This finding aligns with that of Rahayu (2011), who investigated frontline staff responsiveness and customer satisfaction in selected shopping malls in Pakistan. The study which involved 215 respondents, adopted descriptive research design and attempted to understand why time is of essence to customers. The findings were that responsive organizations know when, what and how to meet customers' demands and needs. Due to this quality, the shopping mall is getting positive reviews and enjoys high rate of referrals thereby enhancing its competitive edge. However, these findings need to be subjected to hypothesis testing in this study. Hence the proposition that:

H_{0:4} There is no significant relationship between responsiveness of personnel and guest referrals of 4 star hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Methodology

The cross sectional survey design was adopted for this study; while the population comprised customers of the 442 hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria (Hotels.ng, 2019). However, the accessible population was streamlined to the customers of 4 star hotels in Port Harcourt because of the standard and effective nature of their front desk operations. According to hotels.ng, there are 10 of these 4 star hotels in Port Harcourt; and they are mostly located around the Government Reserved Areas (GRAs) in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Since the population is infinite, the Cochran's Formula for sample size determination in an unknown population was used to determine the number of customers to be sampled. The Cochran' formula is given as:

$$n = \frac{Z^2(pq)}{e^2}$$

Where:

n = sample size sought

Z = standard deviation for the desired confidence value (1.96)

p = estimated proportion of the population having the desired characteristics

q = 1- p

e = level of significance (0.05)

So when;

p = 0.89, q = 0.11, Z = 1.96 and e = 0.05, n will be approximately 150 guests.

Hence, the sample size comprised one hundred and fifty (150) guests; implying that 150 copies of the instrument were distributed to these number of guests. Since the 10 hotels used for the study are of the same standard in terms of rating, the 150 copies of the instrument

were equally distributed among them; that is, 10 copies for each of the hotels. The accidental sampling technique was used in selecting the guests in each of the hotels. Data for the study were generated from the primary source through the instrument (questionnaire) developed for the study. It comprised two main sections. The first section focused on demographic data of the respondents; while the second focused on the study variables which included 'service quality assurance' and 'responsiveness of personnel' for the predictor variable - FDOM; as well as 'guest repeat visit' and 'guest referrals' for the criterion variable - guest loyalty. Validity of the instrument was established through peer review and literature; while the Cronbach alpha test was used to ascertain the reliability, with the scores exceeding the 0.7 mark (.775 for 'service quality assurance', .802 for 'responsiveness of personnel', .798 for 'guest repeat visit' and .787 for 'guest referrals'). Descriptive statistics were used for respondents' demographic analysis as well the univariate analysis. While, the Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used to test the hypotheses and ascertain the relationship between FDOM and guest loyalty at the .05 level of significance. To operationalize the variables, each of these four variables were measured with three items on a 5 point modified Likert scale ranging from 1- 5 (Undecided – 1, Strongly disagree – 2, Disagree – 3, Agree – 4, Strongly agree – 5). Such questions as 'The transaction and payment at the front desk office are safe, secure and kept confidentially' and 'The front office personnel have adequate knowledge of the services and products offered by the hotel so as to enable them address my requests and complaints' were asked for service quality assurance. For responsiveness of personnel, such questions as 'The personnel at the front office desk are always paying attention to detail when rendering service' and 'the front desk personnel's response to my requests and complaints are timely and effective' were asked. Similarly, questions like 'The attitudes of the front personnel makes me to revisit this hotel' and 'I always revisit this hotel because of the quality service I get from the front desk office' were asked for guest repeat visit. While such questions as 'This hotel was recommended to me by a friend/family member' and 'I always say positive things about this hotel to my friends / family and relative' were asked for guest referral.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Out of the one 150 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 139 copies which amounted to 92.67% response rate were retrieved; while 21 copies (i.e. 7.33%) were not retrieved. Out the retrieved copies, 126 were accurately completed, representing 84% accurate response rate; while 13 copies (8.67%) were wrongly responded and were not used for the analyses. Therefore, data and analyses for this study were based on 126 copies of the responded questionnaire.

Table 1: Gender of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	74	58.7	58.7	58.7
Valid Female	52	41.3	41.3	100.0
Total	126	100.0	100.0	

Source: Survey Report, 2019

Table 1 shows the gender distribution of the respondents. Seventy- four which amounted to 58.7% of the respondents are males while fifty-two which amounted to 41.3% are females.

Table 2: Age of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 18 – 20 years	75	60.0	60.0	60.0
21 – 29 years	27	21.2	21.2	61.2
21 – 29 years	18	15.0	15.0	96.2
40 years	6	4.8	4.8	100.0
Total	126	100.0	100.0	

Source: Survey Report, 2019

Table 2 shows the age of the respondents. 75 (60.0%) of the respondents are within age group of 18-20years, 27 (21.2%) of the respondents are within the age group of 21-29 years, 18 (15.0%) of the respondents are within the age group of 30-39 years, 6 (4.8%) of the respondents are within the age group of 40 years and above.

Table 3: Qualification of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid H.N.D	77	61.1	61.1	61.1
Bachelor Degree	39	31.3	31.3	92.4
Master Degree	10	7.6	7.6	100.0
Total	126	100.0	100.0	

Source: Survey Report, 2019

Table 3 shows the academic qualification of the respondents. 77 persons representing 61% of the respondents have higher national diploma (HND), 39 persons representing 31% of the respondents have bachelor's degree while the remaining 10 persons representing 8% of the respondents have masters' degree.

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis of Service Quality Assurance

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Service quality assurance	126	1.50	5.00	3.43	.38
Valid N (listwise)	126				

Source: Survey Report, 2019.

Table 4 shows the descriptive analysis result for service quality assurance. From the table, it could be seen that the minimum value is 1.50 and the maximum value is 5.00. The mean is 3.43 with a standard deviation of .38. For the purposes of the univariate analyses, the following classification of the mean returns by Asawo (2009) was adopted 1.0 - 2.0 – low, 2.1 -

2.8 – moderate, 2.9 - 3.5 – high, 3.5 and above – very high. Hence, service quality assurance having returned a mean of 3.43 was accepted as highly applicable according to the respondents' perception.

Table 5: Descriptive Analysis of Service Quality Assurance Items

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Service quality assurance 1	126	1.00	5.00	3.38	.80
Service quality assurance 2	126	1.00	5.00	3.63	.63
Service quality assurance 3	126	2.00	5.00	3.30	.67
Valid N (listwise)	126				

Source: Survey Report, 2019.

Table 5 shows the descriptive analysis result for each of the items of service quality assurance. It reported mean values of 3.38, 3.63 and 3.30 respectively for items 1 – 3 of service quality assurance. This implies that all the items were accepted as highly applicable by the respondents. In other words, that the transactions and payment process at the front desk office are safe, secure and kept confidentially; that the front office personnel have adequate knowledge of the services and products offered by the hotel, so as to enable them address requests and complaints; and that the front desk department keeps records of guests accurately and confidentially.

Table 6: Descriptive Analysis of Responsiveness of Personnel

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Responsiveness of personnel	126	2.00	5.00	3.40	.81
Valid N (listwise)	126				

Source: Survey Report, 2019.

Table 6 shows the descriptive analysis result for responsiveness of personnel. It reported a mean value of 3.40, indicating that respondents adjudged it to be highly applicable.

Table 7: Descriptive Analysis of Items for Responsiveness of Personnel

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Responsiveness of personnel 1	126	1.00	5.00	3.50	.82
Responsiveness of personnel 2	126	1.00	5.00	3.42	.79
Responsiveness of personnel 3	126	1.00	5.00	3.29	.87
Valid N (listwise)	126				

Source: Survey Report, 2019.

Table 7 shows the descriptive analysis result for each of the items of responsiveness of personnel. It reported mean values of 3.50, 3.42 and 3.29 respectively for items 1 – 3 of responsiveness of personnel. This implies that all the items were accepted as highly applicable by the respondents. This means that the respondents accepted that the personnel

at the front desk always pay attention to details when rendering service; that they respond to requests and complaints timely and effectively; and that they know how to respond to complaints and direct them to the right department when necessary.

Table 8: Descriptive Analysis of Guest Repeat Visit

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Guest repeat visit	126	2.00	5.00	3.32	.76
Valid N (listwise)	126				

Source: Survey Report, 2019.

Table 8 shows the descriptive analysis result for guest repeat visit. It reported a mean value of 3.32, indicating that it was accepted by the respondents as highly applicable.

Table 9: Descriptive Analysis of Items for Guest Repeat Visit

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Guest repeat visit 1	126	1.00	5.00	3.12	.69
Guest repeat visit 2	126	1.00	5.00	3.31	.77
Guest repeat visit 3	126	1.00	5.00	3.52	.78
Valid N (listwise)	126				

Source: Survey Report, 2019.

Table 9 shows the descriptive analysis result for each of the items of guest repeat visit. The reported mean values are 3.50, 3.42 and 3.29 respectively for items 1 – 3 of guest repeat visit. This indicates the respondents accepted all the items as highly applicable. In other words, guests always visit the hotels because the physical appearance is appealing; the attitude of the front desk personnel makes them to revisit the hotels; and that they always revisit the hotels because of the quality service they get from the front office department.

Table 10: Descriptive Analysis of Guest Referrals

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Guest Referrals	126	1.00	5.00	3.49	.77
Valid N (listwise)	126				

Source: Survey Report, 2019.

Table 10 shows the descriptive analysis result for guest referrals. It reported a mean value of 3.49, indicating that it was accepted by the respondents as highly applicable.

Table 11: Descriptive Analysis of Items for Guest referrals

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Guest Referrals 1	126	1.00	5.00	3.90	.75
Guest Referrals 2	126	1.00	5.00	3.22	.74
Guest Referrals 3	126	1.00	5.00	3.36	.84
Valid N (listwise)	126				

Source: Survey Report, 2019.

Table 11 shows the descriptive analysis result for each of the items of guest referrals. It reported mean values of 3.90, 3.22 and 3.36 respectively for items 1 – 3 of guest referrals. This indicates the respondents accepted all the items as highly applicable. In other words, guests accepted that 'this hotel was recommended to me by a friend/family member'; 'I always say positive things about this hotel to my friends/family and relative'; and that 'this hotel is always recommended for conventions, meetings and holidays'.

Test of Hypotheses

The decision rule for all the hypotheses is 'do not uphold the null hypothesis if the probability value (P – value) is greater than the level of significance; otherwise, uphold it'.

$H_{0:1}$ There is no significant relationship between service quality assurance and guest repeat visit.

Table 12: Correlations of Service Quality Assurance and Guest Repeat Visit

		Service Quality Assurance	Guest Repeat Visit
Service Quality Assurance	Pearson Correlation	1	.792**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
	N	126	126
Guest Repeat Visit	Pearson Correlation	.792**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	
	N	126	126

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS output of data analysis result, 2019.

Table 12 shows the result of the correlation between service quality assurance and guest repeat visit. It reported a p-value of .003 and an r - value of .792. Since the p-value is less than the .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was not upheld. The r value of .792 implies a high positive relationship between the two variables. Hence, there is a significant and strong positive relationship between service quality assurance and guest repeat visit of 4-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

This finding is not surprising as it agrees with that of Bolton (1994) who used his study of Backlays bank in England to establish a strong positive correlation between quality service assurance and repeat visit of the banks customers. According to the study, when customers were sure they could trust the E-services rendered by the workers, they tended to come back. Similarly, support was also found in the works of Rust (1993) who used his study of service quality and customer satisfaction to prove that service assurance is a determining factor in customers repurchase intentions. Other supportive studies include those of Kaura, Prasad and Sharma (2015); Cronin and Taylor (1992) and Oliver (1980). However, Anderson and Fornell (1994) used their study of selected fast food centers in Ohio, U.S to argue that repurchase intentions do not automatically translate to actual purchase behavior. These notwithstanding, this study established that quality service assurance is a strong predictor of repeat visit in 4-star hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The coefficient of determination (r^2 i.e. $0.792^2 = .6273$) implies that quality service assurance can be used to predict repeat visit to the tune of 62.73%; leaving the remaining 37.27% to other factors not covered in the model.

Test of Hypothesis Two

H_{0:2} There is no significant relationship between service quality assurance and guest referrals

Table 13: Correlation of Service Quality Assurance and Guest Referrals

		Service Quality Assurance	Guest Referrals
Service Quality Assurance	Pearson Correlation	1	.857**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	126	126
Guest Referrals	Pearson Correlation	.857**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	126	126

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS output of data analysis result, 2019.

Table 13 shows the result of the correlation between service quality assurance and guest referrals. It reported a p-value of .001 and an r - value of .857. Since the p-value is less than the .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was not upheld. The r value of .857 implies a strong positive relationship between the two variables. Hence, there is a significant and strong positive relationship between service quality assurance and guest referrals.

The finding here revealed that service quality assurance is a strong predictor of guest referrals of 4-star hotels in Port Harcourt. This is understandable in that if a customer can be assured of quality service provision by the front desk operations team, he will more likely be willing to refer his friends and relatives to the hotel; unlike when there is no such assurance. This aligns with the finding of Kaura, Prasad and Sharma (2015); who used their investigation of service

quality and customer behavioral intention of selected service organizations in Kuwait to establish that an assured service convincingly makes customers to repeat their visit and go the extra mile of recommending the same service to friends and relatives. Similarly, Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt (2002) who found that to gain and influence positive behavior from clients, service providers must gain the trust and confidence of their clients by providing assured service. Other supportive works include Brady and Cronin (2001) and Gronroos (2007). However, the extent to which service quality assurance can predict guest referrals is a function of the coefficient of determination (r^2) which in this case is 0.857² i.e. 0.7345. Which implies that its predictive power is 73.45%; leaving the remaining 26.55% to other exogenous factors which must be monitored for improved predictive ability.

Test of Hypothesis Three

H_{0:3} There is no significant relationship between responsiveness of personnel and guest repeat visit

Table 14: Correlation of Responsiveness of Personnel and Guest Repeat Visit

		Responsiveness of Personnel	Guest Repeat Visit
Responsiveness of Personnel	Pearson Correlation	1	.778**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	126	126
Guest Repeat Visit	Pearson Correlation	.778**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	126	126

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS output of data analysis result, 2019.

Table 14 shows the result of the correlation between responsiveness of personnel and guest repeat visit. It reported a p-value of .002 and an r - value of .778. Since the p-value is less than the .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was not upheld. The r value of .778 implies a strong positive relationship between the two variables. Hence, there is a significant and strong positive relationship between responsiveness of personnel and guest repeat visit. In other words, responsiveness of personnel is a strong predictor of guest repeat visit of 4-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

This finding is quite understandable in that customers do not like their time being wasted; as such, would value timely response to their requests, orders and issues; and would most likely revisit any hotel where they get this level of responsiveness. Support for this was found in the works of Al-borie and Damanhour (2013), who used their study on service providers' capabilities of hotels in Qatar to prove that a responsive system and service providers' timeliness are good measures of increasing customers' revisit intention. Other supportive

studies include those of Parasuraman et al (1988) as well as Wong and Sohal (2003). It should however be noted that the extent to which responsiveness of personnel can be use to predict guest repeat visit is limited to the coefficient of determination (r^2) which in this case is 0.778² i.e. 0.6053. Which means that its predictive power is 60.53%; leaving the remaining 39.47% to other variables in the environment which must be controlled if the predictive ability of responsiveness of personnel must improve.

Test of Hypothesis Four

H₀:4 There is no significant relationship between responsiveness and guest referrals.

Table 15: Correlations of Responsiveness of Personnel and Guest Referrals

		Responsiveness of Personnel	Guest Referrals
Responsiveness of Personnel	Pearson Correlation	1	.883**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.006
	N	126	126
Guest Referrals	Pearson Correlation	.883**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	
	N	126	126

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: SPSS output of data analysis result, 2019.

Table 15 shows the result of the correlation between responsiveness of personnel and guest referrals. It reported a p-value of .006 and an r - value of .883. Since the p-value is less than the .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was not upheld. The r - value of .883 implies a strong positive relationship between the two variables. Hence, there is a significant and strong positive relationship between responsiveness of personnel and guest referrals. That is to say that responsiveness of personnel is an antecedent of guest referral of 4-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

The finding here is also not surprising; as it was quite anticipated. No doubt, when service providers especially the front desk personnel prove to be responsive, guests will naturally want to recommend the service to friends and relatives. Other studies of similar submissions include Fitri (2012), Malik et al (2011), Mousavi and Nosratabadi, (2015). Support was also found in the work of Rahayu (2011) who used his study of shopping malls in Pakistan to find that responsiveness of frontline staff was responsible for the high rate of referrals and positive reviews enjoyed the shopping malls; thereby enhancing their competitive advantage. Constantine and Iymperopoulou (2009) equally shared this same view in their study of service delivery and customer satisfaction of restaurants. This finding notwithstanding, it should be noted that the predictive power of responsiveness of personnel on guest repeat visit is limited to the coefficient of determination (r^2) which in this case is 0.883² i.e. 0.7797. Which means that responsiveness of personnel can only be used to predict guest referrals to the tune of 77.97%; leaving the remaining 22.03% to other environmental factors not captured in the study's model. Hence, these factors must be controlled for there to be significant improvement in the use of responsiveness of personnel to determine guest referrals.

Research Implications

This study discovered that FDOM has a strong correlation and significant relationship with guest loyalty. As an antecedent of GL, FDOM can be used they predict GL to a reasonable extent. This has far reaching implications both for theory and practice. Theoretically, the finding confirms the disconfirmation theory which proposed that satisfaction is affected by the intensity (or size) and direction (positive or negative) of the gap (disconfirmation) between expectations and perceived performance. This goes to show that the theory has stood the test of time; and is both apt and relevant for management of guest expectations/behavior by front desk officers. Managerially, the study stressed the importance of satisfying customers in today's hospitality business environment characterized by intense competition and business vagaries. To overcome some of these vicissitudes, the study has proven that hotel operations managers can improve GL in terms of repeat visit and referrals by effective management of their front desk operations. Specifically, they can use the dimensions of FDOM to predict guest loyalty to a large extent. However, they must study the other exogenous factors that are capable of hampering their desired outcome, and control their effects so as to achieve maximum results.

Conclusion

This study set out to establish the relationship between FDOM and GL of 4-star hotels in Port Harcourt. FDOM was dimensioned with service quality assurance and responsiveness of personnel; GL loyalty was measured by repeat visit and referrals; giving rise to four hypotheses. A sample of 150 hotel guests was drawn for the study; while the analysis was based on 126 of these guests. The univariate analyses showed acceptable level for each of the variables; while the correlations were performed with Pearson's product moment correlation technique at a significance level of 0.05. The result showed strong positive correlations between the dimensions of FDOM and the measures of guest loyalty. Based on these, it was concluded that FDOM is a strong predictor of guest loyalty; as hotel operations managers can use it to achieve their desired levels of improved outcomes especially in terms of repeat visit and referrals.

Recommendations

From the research analysis, the following recommendations were made to enhance the operations of hotels; especially, the front office department.

1. To achieve desired levels of guest repeat visits and referrals, hotel management especially the front office department should regularly train their staff so they can be continuously updated with latest front desk management practices. This will equip them with the requisite knowledge on how to handle customers' requests and complaints so as to assure them of service quality.
2. Front office personnel should be taught and encouraged to be responsive in their dealings with guests/customers. This would require a great deal of timeliness in handling guest requests and complaints; as well reporting to the appropriate authorities in matters they cannot handle.
3. They should be made to understand that they are the image makers of the hotels since they are the first official contact personnel of the hotels. As such, virtues like politeness, patience and smartness are invaluable.

4. Hotel management should provide effective feedback mechanism that can encourage guests to report on their service experience before and/or after leaving the hotel. This can be done by encouraging customers to fill out service experience evaluation forms as part of the checking out protocols. A good front office management information system can handle this. The essence is to ensure responsive handling of complaints before the guest leaves.
5. Guest records should be kept confidentially as this will in turn give the guest more confidence to re-visit or refer others.
6. They should regularly scan and monitor the environment for factors not accommodated in the study's model that are capable of limiting the predictive ability of service quality assurance and responsiveness of personnel. When these factors are identified, they should be isolated and possibly controlled, so as to eliminate or reduce their impact. Such factors may include government policies, exchange, interest and inflation rates, activities of competitors, as well as demographic factors.

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